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ABSTRACT

An approach to assess organizational change within the university is considered. The research approach was designed to use the strength of the university to examine and document an organizational change that evolved over time and resulted in unplanned outcomes is described. Important decisions that influenced the design of the survey instrument include: the questions were to reflect the political, sociological, and communication dimensions; some items would allow open answers, and the survey would use the interview approach. The final survey instrument included: 10 items concerning staff characteristics; 10 items related to decision-making, power, control, and political activity; 10 items that identified communication channels; two items that measured feelings of loss and grief; two items that identified the interaction groups that operated during the change process; and items designed to measure the individual's interpretation of the institutional mission and the way in which the reorganized units reflected the institutional mission. An important research issue was the fact that organizational change is a developmental process that occurs within a historical and economic context. The sensitivity of self-examination also was evidenced: for the secure, their research approach became an exercise in expression and introspection, while the less secure were more threatened by survey questions. The collegial approach was selected in an effort to positively enhance the mission governance style, and personnel of those units involved in the reorganization of the university. (SW)

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ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

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Organizational Change: Implications for Institutional Research

The environment surrounding the management of higher education is becoming increasingly complex. Economic, social and political forces act on colleges and universities in many different ways and produce a variety of results. Institutions frequently respond to environmental pressures by changing their organizational structures and/or their academic offerings.

Change and transition within business organizations is viewed as a management challenge (Beckhard and Harris, 1977). This is especially true for universities where the traditional governance model is collegial; the faculty play major roles in academic change processes. There can be much risk to the institution and to the individuals involved in the change process because the collegial approach involves many individuals with differing philosophies influencing the outcomes of the process. Langston (1977) compared the behavior of faculty members experiencing reorganization to family members coping with death. Her study stuggested that mourning and grieving behaviors resulted when those involved in change perceived a loss, when the individual felt that he was being deprived of something he had had. The behaviors Langston found in her study included somatic disorders, preoccupation with the organization as it had been, guilt, hostility, irritability, anger, weeping, helplessness, anxiety and shock or disbelief. Each of the behaviors studied impacted upon the collegium during the process.

The study of organizational change can be a most sensitive area of inquiry. A research approach is suggested which was designed to use the strength of the university, the collegium, to examine and document an organizational change which evolved over time and resulted in unplanned outcomes. The approach

was selected in an effort to positively enhance the mission, governance style, and personnel of those units involved in the reorganization and the university.

The Research Approach

As the institution initiated the administrative actions that were to consolidate two operating colleges and one institute into a single college, several of the administrators and faculty felt that this activity would be a most valuable study. Over coffee one morning (a time of great importance to academics), a number of faculty and administrators were hypothesizing about the reorganizational change. A few gloom and doomers, a few glowing optimists, several realists and a few acadamian nuts were often seen gossiping about the most current items related to the reorganization. One bearded brain suggested that federal funds might be available to study the reorganization because the results could assist other institutions which may be contemplating organizational changes. (Federal funds, being absent, did not respond.) "This would be a great study of constituent groups," shouted the political scientist in the group. "No, wait," suggested the sociologist, "Look at the alliances, the interpersonal interactions." "Wow," said an administrator of uncertain (professional) heritage, "See the informal communication network; we haven't spoken this much to one another for years." "Yes," said the ole sage of the group, "We should examine the change process from a multidisciplinary approach. We shall develop a small committee representative of the disciplines and representing a variety of viewpoints."

A first meeting of the committee identified many questions of interest to the professionals present. The sociologist spoke of threat to individuals and possible alienation resulting from the reorganization. The political

scientist and the educational administrators were interested in the redistribution of power, the alliances, the negotiating, and the strain on the collegial governance model. Others present were interested in the speed and accuracy of the formal and informal communication channels within the institution. All the committee determined from this postulating was that an exploratory study should be designed which would examine the change process from the political, sociological and communication dimensions. Figure 1 illustrates the potential relationship of the various dimensions, the importance of each to the institution and the need to collect demographic data for control and interpretation.

The Survey Instrument

Several important decisions were made which influenced the design of the survey instrument:

1. The questions were to reflect the political, sociological and communication dimensions. The vocabulary used for construction of the survey items was to reflect the appropriate dimensions (no heavy political questions hidden in soft sociological lingo!).

2. Some items were designed for open answers, knowing that it would make compiling data more difficult.

3. The survey would be conducted using an interview approach, even though this time-consuming method might alter the study's outcome.

4. Confidentiality was essential to guarantee participation in the study.

The final survey instrument included approximately:

1. Ten items concerning demographic data. Questions related to type of position, rank, tenure, and discipline were included in this section.

2. Ten items related to decision-making, power, control and political activity. Questions related to who designed, planned, or controlled the process,

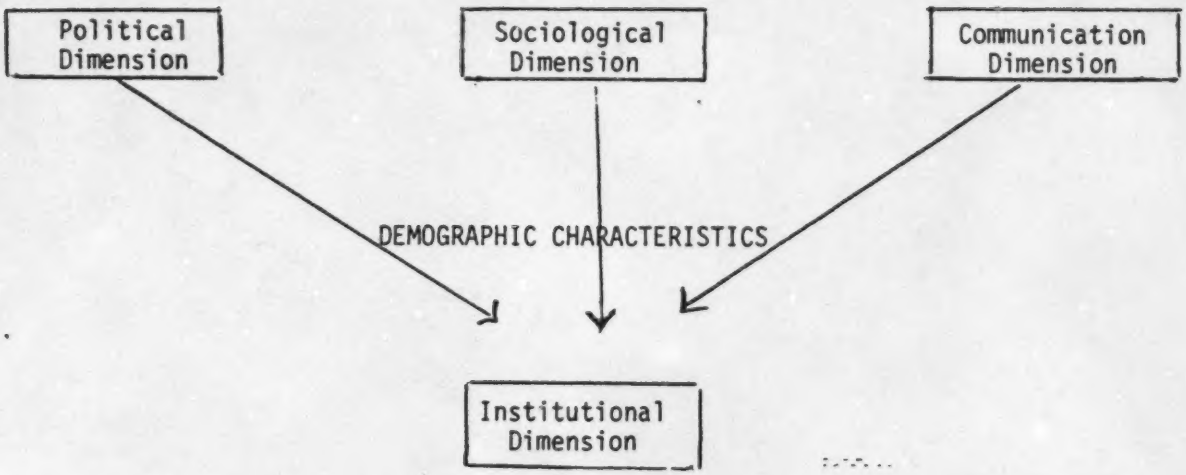

Figure 1: Examination of the Change Process: A Collegial Perception

the individual's role or political activity in the merger, and the causes or reorganization were included in this portion.

3. Ten items were included which identified formal and informal sources designed to determine the communications channels.

4. Two items were included from the Langston study (1977) on reorganization change which measured feelings of loss and grief. Two more items were included which identified the interaction groups during the change process.

5. Several final items were included which were designed to measure the individual's interpretation of the institutional mission and the way in which the reorganized units reflected the institutional mission.

The instrument was designed so that various subgroups of the original committee could analyze different aspects of the study, report upon the topic and integrate the related papers after more than a year of analysis. Michael and Barbe's presentation, The Practice-Theory Practice, and this discussion on a collegial approach to institutional research are the first two examples. Other papers may reflect topics such as Research on the Urban Mission; The Functional Relationship Within an Organization; The Outcomes of Unplanned Changes; The Individual Within the Organization; and The Interpretation of Organizational Change in Higher Education.

The Research Issues

The design of the interview instrument was based on several important decisions made by the research committee. Several other issues became important to the study of institutional change:

1. Organizational change is a developmental process. The design of the study should provide for the observation of several variables over time. For example, the feelings of those interviewed will change with the passage of time. A few questions should be designed to measure this developmental process.

2. Institutional administrative changes occur within a historical and economic context. The research should be reported within the same context. For example, the academic programs of the 1960's enrolled many students in social service programs. These programs are more prone to reorganization during this current decade.

3. There are many examples of sensitive institutional research topics. The collegial approach is one method for approaching such research. If the findings of such research are reported outside of the institution, then an editorial board should review the shared information.

The Research Proper

At the present stage of this aspect of the research process, the issues posed above seem to support earlier decisions made by the research committee.

1. Organizational change is indeed a developmental process. As variables are identified and observed over time, they become somewhat elusive. The interview process itself becomes one of the prime frustrations. Many actors, few interviewers--and the base line must be established rather early in the reorganization to provide an adequate bench mark for later comparisons. Actors/subjects within the now new unit vacillate as initial decisions affecting them emerge rapidly. Positions and power shifts, procedures are modified, and "the way we used to do it" echo throughout the walls without ivy. The outcomes of unplanned changes (created by initial unobserved feelings?) create further changes. However, the controls must be in place. The researchers face the imponderable and the ponderable, but time works against the pondering.

Demographic characteristics may well self-select those who might anticipate gain, those whose status might be perceived as being threatened, those who flow along. (Spell tenure with a capital "T" in examining change.)

2. Changes do occur within a historical and economic context. As the various units merge and take shape as a large identifiable entity, the researchers must constantly be alerted to the decision-making, a shift necessitated by the sheer increase in the number of actors and activities. The economy of time looms as one major outcome of change.

In addition, the shifting of resources to programs that more clearly reflect the emerging new mission of any new organization demands both clarity in the definition of mission as well as communication of the understanding of that mission.

History and economics form the backdrop that frame emerging perceptions and make the assessment of current perceptions even more elusive.

3. The sensitivity of self-examination did and does emerge. For the secure, such a research approach can become an exercise in expression and introspection; the less secure can obviously be more threatened by questions that even Scarlett O'Hara would have preferred to think about the day after tomorrow. Underline confidentiality. And beyond the individual, the institution must not become the victim. (Note: we must remember to buy the ole sage another cup of coffee and discuss the establishment of an editorial board to review how much of what information is to be shared.)

The Emerging Data

Cursory examination of near-completed interviews suggests that the model of this approach is valid. But . . .

1. Hypotheses become educated hunches rather than carefully controlled scientific inquiry.

2. Design becomes evolutionary in this approach as opposed to the suggested textbook pre-design format.

3. Subjects interact with the variables under investigation and with each other; therefore, the variation between dependent and independent variables becomes cloudy.

4. Methods must be allowed to vary to match both the dimensions of the approach as well as the survey instrument.

5. Data thus is not static; it reflects a point in time and contributes to generalizability (but cautious generalizability).

6. Results must be viewed as being of less importance than the framing of an approach. While more traditional designs/procedures would yield results of somewhat questionable value, this exploration is uniquely suited to this study of organizational change.

The Summary

The examination of controversial topics such as organizational change pose a challenge to individuals within an institution's research unit. The approach suggested in this paper sacrificed some of the traditional research rigor in an effort to better understand the change process. Exploratory studies, such as this, may extend the type of research conducted at some institutions. This approach has had some very helpful results at our institution; perhaps you may find it helpful.

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